English Education in Iran: From Ambivalent Policies to Paradoxical Practices

Ferdows Aghagolzadeh and Hossein Davari

Abstract The present chapter, describing the socio-political, cultural and ideological contexts within which the Iranian education system is located, first provides an overview of the ups and downs of English language education in Iran during two distinct phases: before and especially after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Then, drawing on critical perspectives on language policy and planning, it attempts not only to introduce the process of formation and evolution of the available documents which directly or indirectly deal with English education, but also tries to identify the orientation of the Iranian state's language policy through analyzing such documents as well as examining the practices which are mostly inconsistent with policies. Moreover, due to the significant deficiency of English education in the public sector, which has still not met the learners' needs, the role of the private sector mainly shouldering responsibility for the English education is addressed. Finally, the chapter speculates in brief on possible future trend of English education in Iran and outlines the probable challenges which might result from the tensions between the internationalization and domestication of English uncovered in two rival sectors, i.e. the private and public education systems.

Keywords English education • Iran • Language policy and planning • Private sector • Public education system • Paradoxical practices • Future trend • Internationalization • Domestication

1 Introduction

It is impossible to present an account of English education policy and practice in Iran, including past, present and probable future trends, without first scrutinizing the political, socio-cultural, historical and ideological context of the

F. Aghagolzadeh (✉)
Department of Linguistics, Tarbiat Modares University (TMU), Tehran, Iran
e-mail: aghagolz@modares.ac.ir

H. Davari
Department of English Language, Damghan University (DU), Damghan, Iran
e-mail: h.davari@du.ac.ir

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country. This account therefore begins by attempting to provide a vivid, albeit brief, picture of Iranian society.

Iran, a country of approximately 80 million, consists of people with diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It has been the cradle of many civilizations, and Islam has been the predominant religion. Despite the living presence of some notable minority languages such as Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, etc., Persian is overwhelmingly used as the official language in all aspects of everyday life, including education, government, media and so on. Like most of its neighbors in the Middle East region, Iran belongs to what Kachru (1985) called the "expanding circle" countries with regard to the use and status of English.

While in recent decades, Iran has globally acquired a reputation as an anti-Western and anti-imperialistic country, English, as one of the most outstanding features of Western imperialism which sometimes is regarded as the language of "enemies," namely the United States and United Kingdom (see, Borjian 2013; Davari and Aghagolzadeh 2015), is considered by far the first and most important foreign language in Iranian society.

Iran, which was under the geopolitical and cultural influence of the West in general and the United States in particular through the Islamic Revolution in 1979, has followed an anti-imperialistic ideology in different realms, including education. Reviewing the past and present status of English in this society indicates that the rise and fall of this language corresponds notably to different sociopolitical variables such as power, economy, ideology, policy and so forth. However, this sociopolitical context with its ups and downs with respect to English – a context that could arguably be considered unique to Iran (see, Borjian 2013) – has been largely neglected in the field of English language policy studies. In an effort to partially fill this gap, this chapter, making use of the related theoretical frameworks on the topic, attempts to offer the reader a clear picture of English education policy and practices in Iranian society and address its ebbs and flows that correspond to socio-political motives and changes.

2 Discussions on English Language Policy

The decade leading up to the turn of the millennium brought a resurgence of interest in the field of language policy and planning, fueled in large part by the imperious spread of English (Hornberger 2006). Subsequently, streams of work in this field have called greater attention to the role and function of English as an emerging important language in the global arena. This language, with its different symbols and meanings (Shohamy 2006), accompanied by various classifications and perspectives in the field of language policy studies, has been of great importance and a focal point of academic research. While from the mainstream perspective, known as *laissez faire* language policy (see, Phillipson 2003), English is recognized as a language of prestige and globalization and is seen gaining status via the plans and

policies of some nation-states and territories including Hong Kong and Singapore (Crystal 1997), from the critical perspectives, English is regarded as a symbol of imperialism (Phillipson 1992; Ricento 2000), and its spread has been faced with some resistance (Canagarajah 1999).

As the field of language policy has expanded to include an increasingly diverse body of research, the scope of investigation into *educational language policy* or *language education policy*, which tends to rely as much on sociological and educational theory and methodology as it does on socio- or applied linguistics and early language planning and language policy work (Johnson 2013), has simultaneously expanded too. Meanwhile, due to the increasing importance of the English language in any education system worldwide, language education policies, which have been historically used to manage national languages at the expense of minority languages, have tended toward managing and making decisions on English education as a foreign, second or international language. According to Shohamy (2006), the decisions often include issues such as: which language(s) to teach and learn in schools? When (at what age) to begin teaching these languages? For how long (number of years and hours of study) should they be taught? By whom, for whom (who is qualified to teach and who is entitled or obligated to learn) and how (which methods, materials, tests, etc.)? (see also, Kaplan and Baldauf 1997).

As a general rule, such decisions are more important in countries with centralized education system, especially the ones in which English is known as a foreign language and consequently English classrooms serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that takes place. In such situations, decisions regarding language education policies, made mostly by central authorities, serve as a mechanism for carrying out explicit or implicit national language policy agendas. It is worth noting, as Shohamy (2006) points out, that while language education policies are sometimes stated explicitly through official documents such as curricula or mission statements, in many instances, they are not stated explicitly, but rather derived implicitly by examining a variety of de facto practices. Thus, such policies are more difficult to detect as they are "hidden" from the public eye. It is in these situations that language education policy needs to be discerned from actual language practices through the study of some elements including textbooks, teaching practices, testing systems and so forth.

Understanding the importance of this criterion in any language policy studies as well as attending to the fact that no language education policy can stand alone but is rather connected to political, cultural, social and economic dimensions, the present chapter studies and analyzes the essence of English education policy in Iran on the basis of such a theoretical framework.

It is worth noting that reviewing the Iranian literature on the topic reveals that there is a dearth of research addressing English language education policy in Iran. This might be due to the fact that first, there is an undeniable absence of local expertise on the issue, and second, the issue is new to the Iranian applied linguistics community. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the few studies that have touched on the issue have not gone beyond historical accounts.

3 The Ups and Downs of English in Iran

Drawing from the writings of Beeman (1986), Tollefson (1991), Aliakbari (2002), Hayati and Mashhadi (2010), Mazlum (2012), Atai and Mazlum (2013), Davari (2013), Borjian (2013), and Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), here the story of English is studied in two distinct phases: Pre- and Post-revolutionary Iran.

3.1 English in Pre-revolutionary Iran

During the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), Iran experienced extensive collaboration with the West on economics and education, as well as political and cultural affairs. Throughout this period, practical steps were taken toward establishing a modern society, and the sphere of education was not an exception to the rule. In fact, in response to the needs of the national economic reform agenda and the country's push for modernization, new aims for education were formulated with an orientation toward the outside world, especially the West. Undoubtedly, in such a new context, English and English education received much more attention, and the emergence of this language's status as Iran's number one foreign language dates back to this period (see, Borjian 2013; Farhady et al. 2010).

According to Tollefson (1991), between the mid-1950s and late 1978, English steadily expanded to become the most common second language in Iran and became the major language of business, military, higher education and the media. In his view, it is impossible to analyze the fate of English after 1978–1979 without first achieving a basic understanding of the language's role in Iran under the Shah.

In short, the main features of the English language's growing presence in this period can be introduced as follows:

3.1.1 American and British Associations

As noted, in this period, much value was assigned to English and English language education. In such a situation, a turning point in the educational activities of the American and British missions took place.

The first of these missions to begin operating in Iran was the British Council, the most famous and the oldest British international organization for educational and cultural relations. According to Borjian (2011), its operation under the Pahlavis can be categorized into two distinct phases: the introductory phase (1942–1952) and the expansion phase (1955–1978).

Following the start of its activities in 1942, as Borjian (2013) notes, the British Council's initial heyday in Iran did not last very long, and its operation came to an end in 1952 in the midst of the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute.

In the second phase of expanding operation, beginning in 1955, the British Council resumed its activities with a more vigorous focus on English language education. In this period, it offered general English courses and international English proficiency exams, conducted teacher training summer workshops, provided consultation to Iran's Ministry of Education and promoted English for specific purposes (ESP) methodology and textbooks at university levels (Yarmohammadi 2005). According to Borjian (2013), by June 1978, the Council's level of representation in Iran ranked among the top three countries in the world.

Alongside these British endeavors, growing American efforts to officially contribute to development of English led to the establishment of the Iran-American Society (IAS) in 1950. Adopting a mission to develop and expand the use of English in Iran, this Society recruited many American instructors to teach English language to Iranian students. In line with its mission, IAS provided some grants for English language teachers and professors to study English literature and teaching methodology in American universities. It also held some training seminars for teachers who had not studied in United States (Strain 1971, cited in Khajavi and Abbasian 2011). This society, as Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) note, set up branches in major cities such as Tehran and Shiraz, with instructors mostly from the United States and Britain.

3.1.2 Private English Institutes

With the growing attention given to English, private English institutes came also into existence. Expanding their operations, they established growing number of branches in large cities and shouldered the responsibility of English expansion, especially in provincial cities and among well-off families. The use of Center-produced ELT textbooks with its special Anglo-American cultural content provided the enthusiastic learners with new interesting sources.

3.1.3 Schools

While French, like in many parts of the world, had enjoyed a kind of monopoly as the first foreign language in Iran since the late nineteenth century, in this new atmosphere, which was accompanied by close relationship between the Iranian government and the West, the gap between English and French became much wider in favor of English, and finally English replaced French, becoming the primary foreign language.

During this transition, as Borjian (2013) notes, Iranian schools faced some serious problems. Two factors constituted significant challenges: first, the absence of appropriate textbooks, and second, the lack of qualified English teachers. In such a situation, although the public schools failed to achieve notable successes with respect to English education, the fact that French lost ground to English in the country's school system marked an unprecedented achievement for English.

3.1.4 Universities

In this phase, higher education was also fundamentally reformed. Newly established universities employed American and British instructors so as to promote the English language in an academic setting. Aliakbari (2002) observed that the presence of native speaking teachers and the contributions of American and British institutions were so abundant and extensive that certain national universities were commonly referred to as American universities. According to Borjian (2013), perhaps the zenith of the 1960s educational reforms was the creation of Pahlavi University in Shiraz in 1962, along the lines of American universities. Not only was English considered a basic requirement for entering or starting the major courses, but English also replaced Persian as the main language of instruction. In addition, without a doubt, as Yarmohammadi (2005) points out, the cooperation of American educational planners in developing ESP textbooks at Iranian universities was also promising.

In all, the drive toward "internationalization" and "modernization," as a salient policy of the Pahlavi dynasty, situated English in an increasingly pre-eminent position in such a way that this policy made the idea of English as a precondition for prosperity and development gradually gain support in Iranian society.

3.2 English in Post-revolutionary Iran

English in post-revolutionary Iran has passed through a host of ups and downs and gone to extremes.

Putting an end to a long-lasting and rooted monarchy, the Islamic Revolution strenuously opposed the West in general and specifically the United States as the main supporter of the fallen kingdom. In such a situation, it was not surprising to see that in the first years of the revolution, as Aliakbari (2002) writes, due to the perception of parallelism between the English language and the United States, this language encountered waves of hostility.

In this case, Tollefson (1991) writes that the Revolution sought to nationalize the use of English. In his words, the end of English domination was associated with the changing structure of power. At least, there is no doubt that in the early years of the Revolution, post-revolutionary reactions to English went to extremes. For instance, within such a climate, the negative attitude toward English led to closing the private English institutes, as well as purging the ELT textbooks. As Borjian (2013) notes, during the early years of the Revolution, the questions as to what to do with English and whether it should stay in school and university curricula or be entirely banned were at the center stage of a heated debate among the new ruling powers of the country.

Debates around "to teach or not to teach English" finally led to teaching English, but mostly in its localized and homegrown form (see Davari and Aghagolzadeh 2015). A review of the ups and downs of English in public and private arenas in

post-revolutionary Iran reveals the relation between this language and political motives and tendencies.

3.2.1 American and British Associations

The Iran-American Society, as the first private international institute with the most notable contribution to the promotion of English, was also closed down and it has not been permitted to return to Iran ever since. Some years after the Revolution, as Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) note, through its nativization, the name of the Iran-American Society was changed to the Iran Language Institute (ILI), as its objectives and curriculum were redefined according to the ideological orientation of the newly established government.

Because of mounting unrest on the threshold of Islamic Revolution, its British counterpart – which according to Borjian (2013) by June 1978 had offices and centers in some large cities with a total of 18 London-appointed staff, 98 local staff, 53 London-recruited English teachers and 38 Council-recruited staff – withdrew its staff from Iran in late 1978. Not long after the establishment of the Islamic government, all the branches of the Council were shut down one after another.

In 2001, in the midst of the reformist administration (1997–2005), as a phase which was accompanied by a visible changeover of the political conditions in Iran, the British Council was officially invited to resume its activities. Organizing ELT workshops, transferring the latest ELT resources and methodology, administering IELTS test, collaborating with private sector, etc. were the most significant tasks of this Council, which remained in operation until 2009, namely in the midst of the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005–2013) (for a detailed account of its operation, see Borjian 2011, 2013).

3.2.2 Private English Institutes

While in the early years of the Islamic Revolution, private English institutes were forcibly closed down, in the second decade of the Revolution, the gradual appearance of such institutes was quite evident. In the third decade onward, this picture changed drastically in such a way that from that time on their operation came to be known as a lucrative industry and big business. In fact, in contrast to the early years of the Revolution, English education in the private sector swung to the other end of pendulum. The majority of institutes mushrooming all over the country, even in small towns and some villages, adopt commercially Center-produced, but pirated textbooks; there has also been a major shift of emphasis from the traditional teacher-centered approach such as audio-lingualism to the common communicative approaches.

Essentially due to the significant deficiency of the public education system, which cannot meet the learners' needs, this sector, as a secondary body of public education, has attracted an increasing number of learners. As Hayati and Mashhadi

(2010) note, after several years, in response to the undeniable necessity of learning English, many private institutes were established across the country for this purpose, given that the public schools could not meet the rising demand. A variety of English courses are now available at private institutes for learners of various ages through different curricula. Regarding their operations, Borjian (2013) draws attention to the fact that one of the most distinctive characteristics of English education in post-1990 Iran has been the empowerment of this sector, which in turn has been responsible for the importation of the "international" model of English education into the country. For instance, with respect to textbooks, curricula and methodology, they keep an eye open for the Center-produced ones. In this regard, the latest Center-produced curricula are adopted; the most recent teaching methods and methodology are followed and the Western cultural load of the teaching materials and course books are explicitly offered and publicized. In a more precise word, native-speakerism is being sought as an ideal situation in this sector.

3.2.3 Schools

After the Islamic Revolution, it is first worth noting, as Farhady et al. (2010) write, that due to the conservative trend of Iranian officials toward English, in addition to the existence of ties between Iran and European countries along with the absence of political relations with the United States, educational policymakers formulated a plan to promote the learning and teaching of five foreign other languages in schools – German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian. Following this decision, the national curriculum committee prepared textbooks for all these languages to be used at schools. However, due to insufficient number of teachers and a low number of student applicants for these languages, English has remained the most dominant foreign language taught at high schools.

Given that English is still the only foreign language choice in practice, the development of new English textbooks for schools constitutes the most significant contribution of English localization in the education system. While the English textbooks developed by Pre-revolutionary Ministry of Education were replaced by newly developed nativized ones in the first years of the Revolution, the structure of English language teaching in schools has remained much the same as it was during the previous educational system.

Today, English is compulsory in the 6-year junior and senior high school curriculum. The curriculum is a top-down one, centrally administered by the Ministry of Education, which dictates all the decisions regarding the textbooks and exams. In contrast, as Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2003) write, in almost all private schools functioning within the three levels of general education –namely primary, junior and high school – English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice. In their views, the quality of the English program and the skill of the teachers working in each school is considered such a crucial factor that it may determine the families' choice to send their children to one or another school. Moreover, the desire to begin English learning at an early age has led to the introduction of English as a subject in kindergartens.

In all, especially during the last decade, English education in schools has been a widely discussed issue at the national level. In fact, with the increasing spread of English and the emergence of the communicative approach to English teaching, the need for changes in national curriculum has arisen.

Even a cursory examination of the textbooks taught during the successive years reveals that despite the growing importance of communicative skills in any English education program, over the course of Post-revolutionary period, the methods, contents and aims of teaching English have not undergone essential changes, and their main focus has been reading, grammar and vocabulary. Textbooks have tended to repeat themselves. With little sense of evolution and exploration, students mostly consider these textbooks boring, ineffective, wasteful and time-consuming. As a result, considerable dissatisfaction among students as well as teachers, especially regarding the textbooks, has been recorded (Haddad Narafshan and Yamini 2011).

Given the growth of the private institutes as the main contributor to the spread of English in its Center version, the public school system has begun to undertake reform and innovation, as traditional methods and materials have been challenged by the demand for communicative and market-oriented approaches. Due to the rising criticism of the inflexible and outdated structure of the textbooks, in spite of the officials' ambivalence, finally the picture is beginning to change. In 2013, the first volume of a six-series English textbook for junior and senior high schools was published under the title of *Prospect*. With this ongoing reform process, which aims to restructure English education through the integration of language skills and language components, it is believed that Iranian students will be better equipped with an ability to communicate. In this new curriculum, English education has been reconceptualized to mainly not only encourage students' active participation in the leaning process and use of the target language in communication, but also encourage teachers to promote students' communicative skills and minimize the use of the mother tongue.

While it is too soon to evaluate and assess the quality and function of the new curriculum, especially the new textbook series, as part of the public curriculum reform process which is aided by the government, it is certain that due to the low availability of competent teachers and limited time, achieving the goals seems out of reach. In addition, since English, especially in many parts of the country, is not immediately relevant to the learners' needs, they usually do not pay serious attention to learning the language and instead devote their efforts to acquiring the minimal competency needed to pass to the next grade level. Undoubtedly, these shortcomings keep pushing English to the margins and can negatively affect the outcomes.

3.2.4 Universities

In higher education, English has gained a partially important status. According to Noora (2008), at the university level, students mostly study English for academic purposes (EAP) and therefore, reading is the most emphasized skill. University

students are required to first take a three-credit General English course, and then they take more specialized English courses in which they focus on their field-related English texts and learn relevant terminology. Contrary to secondary education, at the university level, instructors have the freedom to choose the textbooks and activities for their classes; but the use of locally produced textbooks is dominant.

A decision to develop local English textbooks for universities, which dates back to the introductory years of the Revolution, has been gradually implemented throughout the last three decades. According to Erfani et al. (2010), in the beginning of 1980s, educational authorities, adopting the mission to indigenize English learning in higher education, established the Organization for Research and Compiling University Textbooks in Humanities (SAMT) to develop textbooks in different fields of study. The establishment of the committee of foreign languages as one of the divisions of SAMT paved the way to develop English textbooks for university students. At the outset, they compiled specialized English textbooks for students of science, engineering, social sciences, medicine, mathematics and agriculture. At that time, at the university level, a great need was felt for locally produced ESP textbooks that would be culturally and socially appropriate for the Iranian context. Afterward, as Soleimani (2006) writes, many ESP textbooks have been published to satisfy the needs of policymakers, educationalists curriculum designers. While the purpose behind all of these efforts has been to enable Iranian university students to study their specific academic reference materials and textbooks to get familiar with scientific and technological advances in their field of study, a review of their current status reveals that in spite of their quantitative growth, with reference to quality and efficiency, much remains to be done. Although it has been quite a while since the introduction of the current ESP textbooks into Iranian university systems, as Hashemi (2005) believes, such ESP textbooks may hardly ever meet the actual needs of the Iranian special-purposes students. As noted by Borjian (2013), it is clear that the main focus is on reading and grammatical skills. Regardless of their titles, these textbooks share the same pattern of their predecessors, and communicative components of the language have remained absent from university ESP textbooks. In a more precise word, suffering from some serious drawbacks including lack of needs analysis, mono-skill syllabus, inflexible and clichéd pattern, lack of revisiting and up-to-dating, low face validity, etc. (for more details, see Erfani et al 2010; Farhady 1994, 2006; Soleimani 2006; Zangani 2009), they hardly meet the learners' needs. Along with the shortcomings of these textbooks, other factors – including large class sizes with students of multiple interests and needs, the teaching of ESP courses by mainly by non-native language instructors, and the limited time allocated to such courses – have further aggravated the situation.

On the other hand, despite such shortcomings, the growing desire among university students to leave the country to study abroad will likely result in a situation in which annually thousands of students take IELTS and TOEFL exams inside or even outside the country in the hope of gaining a good command of English guaranteeing them entry into a prestigious university for their postgraduate studies that consequently will provide them with a plum job and good living in future.

3.2.5 English Departments and Professional ELT Networks

English is studied in its own right, as a range of independent fields, with three branches: Translation, TEFL and Literature. In line with more progressive views about learning and teaching languages, Linguistics has been added to these majors, especially at the postgraduate level (Hayati and Mashhadi 2010). In such a situation, there is no doubt that the growth of English as a very popular major in Iranian universities has led to the appearance of many graduates, especially at the BA and MA levels. For example, today nationwide at more than 200 branches of Payam Nour University (so-called long distance education), thousands of students graduate annually at the BA level with a Translation major. Despite these efforts, the overall level of proficiency in English among English language graduates, especially from the newly established universities, remains far from satisfactory.

Apart from Payam Nour University and Islamic Azad University, a private university with more than 300 branches throughout the country, which both insist on quantity rather than quality, some English departments at governmental universities have emerged as the most significant pioneers and players in English education and research in the Iranian academic context.

The pivotal role of ELT professionals, most of them foreign-educated, at Iranian universities, as well as their efforts in publishing research journals, founding associations, holding conferences, organizing workshops and cooperating with private institutes, has been very instrumental in the process of ELT professionalism and advancement in the Iranian academic setting. In this regard, Borjian (2013) maintains that the rise of this coherent body of local experts who through their associations and journals became strong enough to voice their concerns about the low quality of English education offered in school and universities, has been very instrumental. In addition, the publication of some burgeoning research journals by such associations and especially by some universities in the field of ELT and applied linguistics has been profoundly effective in ELT professionalization in Iran.

In this regard, a noteworthy point that has been mostly neglected in the study of English education in Iran is in order here, and it is the advent of a newly growing critical-oriented shift in the Iranian ELT community. As Davari (2013) notes, the field of applied linguistics worldwide and ELT in particular has over the last two decades witnessed the emergence of critical movements which no longer see the globalization of ELT as an inevitable, unproblematic and natural development (see Hall and Eggington 2000) and introduce ELT as a profoundly and unavoidably political activity; in tandem in recent years, particularly in the last decade, the Iranian ELT community has experienced a kind of critical intellectual shift with the appearance of dozens of critical works, indicating that this critical discourse is drawing considerable attention. Among these works are those that deal with important ELT issues such as English linguistic imperialism (Pishghadam and Naji 2011; Mohseni and Karimi 2012; Pishghadam and Zabihi 2012; Davari 2013), critical pedagogy in ELT (Sadeghi 2005; Akbari 2008; Ghaffar Samar and Davari 2011; Rashidi and Safari 2011; Aghagolzadeh and Davari 2012) and critical trend in ELT

materials development and evaluation (Keshavarz and Akbari Malek 2009; Zarei and Khalessi 2010; Baleghizadeh and Jamali Motahed 2010).

Undoubtedly, since the practices and debates currently underway in pedagogical circles have a significant influence on the state and status of English in wider arenas, such a critical trend has led to a situation in which English language education in Iran will likely be a widely discussed issue in the academic setting, not merely as a technical issue, but also as an educational activity infused with politics.

4 State's Position: More Or Less English?

Indentifying the direction and orientation of Iranian state's language policy with respect to English education involves in part considering and evaluating state documents, although in such a context, policies are not necessarily consistent with practices. Reviewing the available documents, some of which are not finalized, Kiany et al. (2011) argue that not only is there no unified document specifically developed under the title of Foreign Language Education Policy (FLEP), but some perceived shortcomings and inconsistencies among the available educational and developmental documents that deal with English education are quite evident.

Obtaining data from various sources, Borjian (2013) attempts to uncover the state's "ambivalence" toward English. In her view, while there is no overt hostility toward English among the authorities, there is a perceptible discourse on English as a medium of Western cultural invasion. Nonetheless, providing the readers with some proofs, she deals with the causes of fundamental changes of attitude on the part of Iranian politicians toward English. She concludes that the field of English language teaching and learning could thus be seen as a site of struggle where multiple forces compete and finally the state moves in favor of more rather than less English.

Studying the language planning and language-in-education policy in Iran, Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) maintain that although Iran's policy on English as an international language stops short of nationwide dissemination of the language, the demands imposed by the irresistible pressure of globalization, along with the status of English as the world lingua franca, have resulted in increased attention to English in recent years. In their views, there is still an increasing perception among the country's policymakers that relates English as a medium of globalization to the imposition of a kind of political, economic, cultural and linguistic imperialism, and as a result the state tends not to embrace English.

Other experts, among them Riazi (2005) and Farhady et al. (2010), have taken the same view. Riazi (2005) believes strongly that the ideological stance of the state's policy toward the English language intends to keep it at a minimum level and eschew its vast dissemination, but the process of globalization has exerted its own pressures to promote the learning of English as a hidden curriculum. Farhady et al. (2010) also maintain that when it comes to foreign language policy or in a more precise word, English, Iran shows a more conservative stance in such a way that the

need to maintain national unity and identity among the young school generation is a real concern. In their views, the main reason for this is the politicization of the language issue after the Islamic Revolution and the fear that English presents a threat to the Persian language and Islamic culture.

In the following, in addition to the above-mentioned views, the researchers, drawing on critical perspectives on language policy and planning, first attempt to introduce the available documents which directly or indirectly deal with English education, then try to identify the orientation of the Iranian state's language policy by analyzing such documents.

One of the first documents which has fleetingly dealt with English education is The National Curriculum Document, which was finalized in 2009. In this development and educational document, it has been explicitly noted that a foreign language is one of the two essential elements of literacy in the third millennium. Thus, the communicative approach with a specific focus on speaking and listening has been emphasized, and it has been suggested that there is a need to reduce the age of language learning as well as teach it at primary school as an optional subject.

Another publication, which is more important than the one previously mentioned, is The Fundamental Transformation of Education, which was approved by the Ministry of Education in 2010. As pointed out, the Ministry is responsible for all top-down decisions, including the adoption of particular curricula and teaching methods, as well as the development of textbooks and the provision of equipment. This important document has allocated only one sentence to foreign language teaching. According to the document "foreign language study [will be offered] as an optional (semi-prescriptive) course in the curriculum on condition that its teaching stabilizes and strengthens the Islamic and Iranian identity." (p. 20)

As Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) write, regarding this sentence, some points are worthy of attention. Like the document described previously, the term 'foreign language' has been substituted for 'English.' The program is designated as 'optional,' and its description as 'semi-prescriptive' remains ambiguous. Its teaching is also subject to certain ideological conditions. (p. 16)

A review of the documents as well as the researchers' views on the topic indicates that at the moment Iranian policymakers are really in doubt. They appear to be caught in a dilemma in which on the one hand, they develop policies that necessitate more English and on the other hand, they avoid developing a separate unitary and unified English language policy that would pave the grounds for introducing and implementing a stable English education practice.

5 Future Trend: A Scene of Challenges

Bolton (2008) argues that the spread of English across Asia has been propelled by a number of related economic and social factors, including demographics, economic change, technology and educational trends. A review of the past and present situation of English and scrutiny of the probable future of this language reveal that due

to the increasing role of English in the globalizing world, naturally the Iranian society should not be considered an exception to this rule. However, because of some specific political, cultural and ideological features of this society in which English has served mostly as a vehicle of educational advancement with little practicability nationwide and not as a means of internationalization, it appears that placing a high premium on English might be confined to an educational system marked by two distinct forms of English, namely the nativized alongside the Center version.

As mentioned, since recent education policies have been created within the discourse of globalization, education is treated as an instrument to keep up with the rapid rate of globalization. In this situation, English as a "language of opportunity" will possibly turn into the language of power and prestige, especially in the educational context. Indeed, the use of this language by a growing educated class or the so-called elites to meet their educational needs might lead to a situation which serves the interests of some over those of others and consequently may result in exacerbating the unequal relationship between different classes in Iranian society.

Overall, the new curriculum reform in the public English education system, which so far has mostly focused on textbook development, can be interpreted as an ambivalent policy change in English education in Iran. In addition, the increasing activity and number of English institutes mushrooming nationwide within the current political context of Iranian society – in which on the one hand the state decision-makers strongly desire to control and manage the important realm of education and on the other hand, the current facilities and equipment of the governmental education system cannot meet and attract the learners' needs and interests – means that the private sector with its prestigious Center version of English emerges in the absence of an organized language policy as a rival that competes directly with the partially growing nativized form. To put it simply, the future will be a scene of an inevitable challenge and growing tension between the globalization and domestication of English.

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